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Los Angeles employment agency owner charged with filing bogus work visa applications Applications named unwitting hospitals and non-profit organizations as prospective employers

LOS ANGELES — The owner of a Los Angeles employment agency was indicted Thursday on immigration fraud charges for allegedly filing more than 100 bogus work visa petitions on behalf of aliens she falsely claimed had been recruited for positions with prominent hospitals and non-profit organizations.

Lilia Tabafunda, 57, the owner of People's Resources International Services in the Wilshire Center district of Los Angeles, was named in a 10-count indictment returned Thursday afternoon by a federal grand jury. The indictment charges Tabafunda with nine counts of visa fraud and one count of perjury. Two of the charges involve alleged fraud and false statements related to Tabafunda's own naturalization application.

"Visa fraud crimes often involve the unwitting and the desperate," said U.S. Attorney André Birotte Jr. "Tabafunda allegedly took this exploitation to new heights, falsely claiming associations with some of America's most trusted organizations, including internationally known cancer centers. Tabafunda exploited the goodwill of these groups for personal gain, shamelessly seeking to compromise the integrity of our naturalization system along the way."

The charges are the result of a probe by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and the Department of Labor's Office of the Inspector General. The investigation began in 2007 after HSI received a lead from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) Fraud Detection and National Security Unit that Tabafunda was filing suspicious H-1B non-immigrant visa petitions.

Tabafunda was arrested Oct. 15 by HSI after she attempted to board a Mexico-bound cruise ship, despite prior instructions from special agents not to leave the country. Tabafunda made her initial court appearance the following day and was released on \$50,000 bond.

Court documents in the case allege that for nearly a decade Tabafunda used the names of shell companies and non-profit organizations in fraudulent employment-based, non-immigrant visa petitions submitted to USCIS and the U.S. Department of Labor. According to the indictment, Tabafunda falsely claimed that her clients were being sought for positions by prominent organizations, including City of Hope, Barlow Respiratory Hospital in Los Angeles and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Among the jobs listed on the fraudulent employment visa petitions were budget analysts, clinical research specialists and "health educators."

Employment-based visas are normally issued when a business in the United States needs someone to fill a specific job and is unable to find a qualified employee in the domestic labor pool. The business can file a petition to allow a particular alien, who is qualified to fill the job, to enter the United States to work for the business.

"It's disturbing that someone would exploit the names of respected hospitals and public service organizations as part of a scheme to defraud the government and the American people," said Claude Arnold, Special Agent in Charge for HSI Los Angeles. "Our message is simple – America's legal immigration system is not for sale and HSI will move aggressively against those who compromise the integrity of that system simply to enrich themselves."

According to court documents, Tabafunda charged her clients anywhere from \$2,500 to \$10,000 to file visa petitions on their behalf. Most of Tabafunda's clients were Philippine nationals who originally entered the United States on tourist visas.

"Immigration fraud is a serious national problem and this indictment is an outstanding example of all levels of the government working together to fight fraud," said Rosemary Langley Melville, director, USCIS California Service Center. "USCIS officers encountered this scam while processing requests for immigration benefits and worked seamlessly with federal partners to identify and investigate this case. We will continue to identify those who threaten the integrity of our immigration system."

Tabafunda is scheduled to be arraigned on the indictment Nov. 13 in U.S. District Court. If she is convicted of all 10 counts in the indictment, Tabafunda would face a maximum statutory penalty of 95 years in federal prison.

Abel Salinas, special agent in charge of the Los Angeles Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Office of Labor Racketeering and Fraud Investigations, stated: "Today's indictment reflects our commitment to investigate allegations of fraud involving the Department of Labor Foreign Labor Certification programs. The Office of Inspector General will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to combat these types of crimes."

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